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ABSTRACT

In May 1914, the largest community pageant production ever staged in the United States, "The Pageant and Masque of St. Louis," was presented in St. Louis's Forest Park. This production, involving over 7,500 participants, was presented not merely for the enjoyment it might bring to its participants and audiences, but also for what the production's leaders saw as its possible role in remedying the social ills of the St. Louis community. The pageant was a large scale experiment in what had come to be known as the Drama of Democracy. It was Percy MacKaye who, through his critical writings and numerous pageant and masque productions, defined what would be accepted as the three fundamental tenets of the "Drama of Democracy." First, it had to be produced and appreciated by the common man. Second, it had to be supported by public funds and agencies. And, third, large numbers of people had to participate in its production. "The Pageant and Masque of St. Louis" fulfilled each of the these three tenets. The action of the pageant and masque was built around Indian tales and the history of the St. Louis area, the production was conceived by the people of St. Louis and produced by civic groups and city administrative officials, and over 7,500 citizens took part in the production. (HOD)

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The Outdoor Community Drama As a Remedy For Social Ills As Illustrated By The Pageant and Masque of St. Louis (1914)

by

Kenneth G. Bryant

April 4, 1985

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In May of 1914, the largest community pageant production ever staged in the United States, The Pageant and Masque of St. Louis, was presented in St. Louis' Forest Park. This production, involving over 7500 participants, was presented not merely for the enjoyment it might bring to its participants and audiences, but for what the production's leaders saw as its possible role in remedying the social ills of the St. Louis community. The Pageant and Masque of St. Louis was a large scale experiment in what had come to be known as the Drama of Democracy.

This afternoon I'd like to discuss the outdoor community pageant movement of the early twentieth century, and, as illustrated by The Pageant and Masque of St. Louis, define the community theatre as Drama of Democracy and how the community drama was thought to be able to cure social ills.

Down through the ages, the theatre had been seen as a social institution. This was true for those theatres used as an edification of its audience, and for those serving to elevate those participating in the performance itself, such as the ballet de cour of sixteenth century France and the court masque of Stuart England.

However, during the early years of the twentieth century, the theatre began to take on a specific social role. The theatre began to be seen as an instrument for curing the social ills of a community. Certainly, the theatre had espoused its

function of teaching moral lessons to its audiences as early as Horace in his "Art of Poetry." Often however, the lesson taught by the play was no more than secondary to the playwright's main aims, profit and pleasure. As Lessing noted in his "Hamburg Dramaturgy," Moliere's Miser never cured a miser, nor Regnard's Gambler, a gambler. But now, as the twentieth century began, theatre, and more specifically the outdoor community theatre in the United States, became a tool by which to "cure" the ills of those witnessing the performance, and of those participating in the production itself. With the pinnacle of its life spanning the few short years from 1905 to 1920, the American outdoor community drama movement flourished in its attempts to rectify what the movement's proponents thought were the social ills of the American people.

Of course, not everyone agreed as to what the principle social ills of the people were. For some, the ills of the American people arose from the growth of the increasingly over-populated big cities across the nation. For Sheldon Cheney, the outdoor community drama was the cure-all for those who were encaged within the borders of urban areas. In his book, The Open-air Theatre, Cheney wrote:

> . . . The current move outdoors is a spontaneous growth, arising, on the one hand, to the rediscovery of the out-of-doors as a corrective to an over-citified

and artificial life.[1]

Albeit there was a growth in the popularity of the out-of-doors at this time which in turn helped increase popularity of the outdoor drama, the principle leaders of the movement did not see the outdoor theatre as a cure for urban claustrophobia. Rather, the leaders of the movement, including Percy MacKaye, Mary Porter Beegle, and Thomas Woods Stevens, agreed that a major social ill of the nation was that the American society was, as they saw it, stratified into distinct and virtually unbreakable economic and social classes. To cure this social ill, the community theatre would produce a Drama of Democracy.

Although not the first to extoll the efficacy of the community pageant and its ability to "democratize" the art, it was Percy MacKaye who, through his critical writings and numerous pageant and masque productions, defined what would be accepted as the three fundamental tenets of the Drama of Democracy.

MacKaye thought, as did other leaders of the movement, that the theatre had become an institution that was controlled by just a few people, was run according to the tastes of those few people, and enjoyed by only the elite few. In democratizing the theatre, MacKaye believed that the drama needed to be produced by the common man, and appreciated by the common man. MacKaye felt that the playwrights of his day were ignoring the needs of the public and that they were writing to please themselves. He

saw the unresponsiveness of the playwrights as the reason that the theatre-going public were "turning away from Ibsen and Maeterlinck . . . to the ubiquitous vaudeville show." To catch and hold the interest of the American public, MacKaye saw the need for a rebirth and a rebuilding of the theatre to satisfy what he saw as a "great re-awakening of our national consciousness," a new drama which, although "rooted deep in the European tradition, would spread over the nation as indigenous and beneficient as American Elm."[2] To be adopted by the millions, this Drama of Democracy needed to be fused with the American spirit.

A second condition was placed on the drama if it were to be truly democratic: the Drama of Democracy had to be supported by the public, with no endowment from the private sector, big business. MacKaye believed that community pageants and masques should be supported by public funds and agencies, and that such funding would become a "new expression of democracy," with the elimination of private profits. Ideally, the community drama would be free and accessible to all people, much the same as a public library. No admission would be charged, except in extraordinary cases, and then the admission should never exceed fifteen cents.[3]

The third, and most important aspect to the democratizing of the theatrical art was the participation of large numbers of

people, belonging to different social and economic classes within the community. Their participation, within an atmosphere of "democratic equality," would serve to bind the community together by their working side by side towards a common goal. Pageants involved, for MacKaye and many of the movement's other leaders, an "expert method for promoting solidarity in community life."[4]

Thus, a truly democratic production would consist of a large-scale community production based primarily on American themes, local histories and stories, and folklore. It would be produced by and for the community in which it was presented. And the admission would, ideally, be free of charge.

Were these conditions ever imposed upon a theatrical production? Did anyone ever truly attempt to produce a drama that would fulfill these conditions for being Drama of Democracy? Was any outdoor community pageant production able to fulfill these conditions, or were MacKaye's beliefs nothing more than pie-in-the-sky dreams? Certainly hundreds of community pageants and masques were mounted under the pretext of Drama of Democracy. Several productions, such as The Pageant of the Northwest and The Pageant of Wisconsin, do indeed appear to satisfy one or more of MacKaye's tenets. Of course, whether these productions which claimed to be Drama of Democracy in actuality were, is hard to verify. Naturally enough, those participating in these

productions could easily have "overlooked" any instances of inequality or other non-"democratic" conditions occurring during the production process.

There was, however, one production that Percy MacKaye himself believed to have satisfied all the conditions necessary to the Drama of Democracy. And, because of the vast amount of contemporary commentary about the production, it still appears to satisfy these conditions when looking at it in today's light. This production was, of course, The Pageant and Masque of St. Louis.

In her book, Community Drama and Pageantry, Mary Porter Beegle declared The Pageant and Masque of St. Louis to have been "the most spectacular of the American pageants, as well as the most artistic."[5] With the pageant slogun being, "If we play together, we will work together," the production was conceived by Charlotte Rumbold, the Secretary of Public Recreation, as being a totally civic pageant with absolutely no commercialism.[6] The St. Louis Pageant Association, headed by Rumbold, approached MacKaye and Thomas Woods Stevens with the idea of writing a community drama that would involve several thousand citizens of the St. Louis area, with the purpose of celebrating the 150th. anniversary of the founding of St. Louis by Pierre Laclede. Stevens, chairman of the first drama program in the United States, was asked to write the pageant play itself, while MacKaye was

asked to write a masque which would immediately follow the pageant. Steven's pageant encompassed St. Louis' history from the time of the Mound Builders, through the Spanish and French explorers, the pioneers with their wagon trains, and ended with episodes showing the developement of the city through the first half of the nineteenth century. MacKaye waited until Steven had finished writing the pageant, having decided to "re-interpret" the same material covered in the pageant "by means of a very few symbolic characters." MacKaye wanted the masque to indicate, through poetry, the symbolism and allegory of the "larger universal meanings which underlie the pageant."[7]

The pageant and masque were performed on a stage built over the lagoon at the foot of Art Hill in St. Louis' Forest Park. This amphitheatre hill was large enough to hold seating for forty-six thousand spectators, with additional room for seating to the sides and rear. The city gave its permission to use the lagoon and hill, and also authorized the selling of tickets to the performances on condition that half the tickets be given away free of charge. The prices for the remaining seats ranged from twenty-five cents for the majority of seats, to $1.50 for the most expensive.[8]

All the actors who took part in the production were amateurs. "Casting cards" were put into the public libraries, department stores, schools, and colleges. The cast for all of the chorus

roles and supporting roles were selected on the basis of the answers given on these cards. The chorus of 750 voices was gathered from German singing societies, church choirs, public and parochial schools, and any individual who applied. Only the six principle speaking roles were cast by means of auditions which had been advertized in the local papers.[9]

Nearly every agency and club in the St. Louis area took part in the mounting of the pageant and masque, including schools, churches, and park and administrative departments. Costumes were built by the Mothers' Clubs of the public schools, and many of the properties were made in the "manual training" classes of the city's schools.[10]

The Pageant and Masque of St. Louis fulfilled each of the three tenets for the Drama of Democracy which had been laid down by Percy MacKaye. First, the action of the pageant and masque was built around Indian tales and the history of the St. Louis area. Secondly, the production had been conceived by the people of St. Louis, and produced by civic groups and city administrative officials. No private businesses were involved trying to make a profit. Ticket prices were higher than MacKaye had deemed desirable, but perhaps we can see that this production, because of its size and scope, falls into MacKaye's own classification of the extraordinary. And remember, over half of each night's available seats, and standing room, were free of charge. And

third, over seventy-five hundred citizens took part in the production, while nearly a quarter of a million people witnessed The Pageant and Masque of St. Louis during its four night run.[11] It was this tremendous scale of participation and turnout which made Percy MacKaye come to believe this pageant and masque production to be the paradigm example of the Drama of Democracy.

Then, in an article for Theatre Arts Magazine for 1950, MacKaye expressed another, fourth, reason why he believed The Pageant and Masque of St. Louis to be a prime example of the Drama of Democracy: the effect the production had on community awareness. For instance, MacKaye had named the Indian/Priest character in his masque, Cahokia, after a tribe of Indians which had lived nearby the St. Louis area. To do "research" on these local Indians, MacKaye had gone across the Mississippi River to E. St. Louis, Illinois to a farm on which stood numerous Indian burial mounds. Facsimilies of these mounds were used onstage as an integral part of the setting for both the pageant and the masque. Many of the audience members who came to see the production became so interested in these mounds that a civic organization was formed to attempt to prevent the farmer who owned the land from levelling the mounds and selling the dirt as filler. This organization was so successful in drawing attention to these mounds that enough money was raised to purchase the land on which the mounds stood. The area was then opened to the public

as a city park which has since become Cahokia Mounds State Park. Because of the large numbers of people who came to view the production, the pageant and masque inadvertantly made a profit. This profit of $22,000 was used to help establish the St. Louis Municipal Opera, a large outdoor theatre facility which is still in use today, located just blocks from where the pageant and masque were performed. Also, according to MacKaye, two members of the cast later became backers of Charles Lindbergh, and "recalling the masque, sent Charles up in the 'Spirit of St. Louis.'"[12]

To us, the idea that an outdoor theatrical production could be used to pull the individual members of the cast and audience together into a cohesive community were all members of society are equal, seems naive. However, productions such as The Pageant and Masque of St. Louis stand as evidence that the notion of a Drama of Democracy was believed during its time. Today, theatre historians tend to look at the years during which the outdoor community pageant drama flourished and smuggly declare that "a pageant is not of the theatre." Perhaps not. But during the early years of the twentieth century, pageant and masque productions became something larger than merely theatre. They became, for their producers and participants, tools for social reform. These community dramas were produced in the hope of instilling a sense of democracy and equality within their

audiences, and particularly within those who took part. And the people did take part, and they did allow themselves to be stimulated into civic co-operation and action. The fervor aroused by The Pageant and Masque of St. Louis, and the reaction to the production by the people of St. Louis, was relived across the nation in hundreds of smaller civic pageants such as The Bronxville Pageant, The Norwich Pageant, and The Lake Champlain Pageant, pulling the citizens of these communities together, if only for a short time.

Today we can look back at these efforts to democratize art and announce that their effects were short lived. Perhaps they were. But maybe that was enough. The leaders of the outdoor community pageant movement were using the outdoor drama as a tool with which to remedy what they saw as the major social ill of their day: the stratification of the American people into distinct and unbreakable economic and social classes. That bigotry and class segregation still occurs in the United States should not be taken as evidence that the Drama of Democracy was too naive in its goals. Rather the Drama of Democracy should be viewed as an experiment--an experiment which asked, and tried to answer, the question of how effective the theatre can truly be as an instrument of reform--an experiment which helped to bring together, if only for a short time, individual members of a community in a spirit of civic and social co-operation.

Notes

[1] Sheldon Cheney, The Open-air Theatre (New York: Mitchell Kennerly, 1918), p. 5.

[2] Percy MacKaye, The Playhouse and the Play (New York: Greenwood Press, 1909), pp. 23, 28, 106, 114, 190.

[3] Percy MacKaye, The Civic Theatre (New York: Mitchell Kennerly, 1912), pp. 15, 78.

[4] Percy MacKaye, St. Louis: a Civic Masque (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday, Page, and Co., 1914), p. xvi.

[5] Mary Porter Beegle and Jack Randall Crawford, Community Drama and Pageantry (New Haven, Conn.: Yale U. Press, 1916), p. 24.

[6] MacKaye, St. Louis, p. viii.

[7] "Celebrating the Story of St. Louis," Independent, 16, March 1914, p. 382.

[8] George Pierce Baker, "The Pageant and Masque of St. Louis," World's Work, Aug. 1914, p. 389.

[9] Charlotte Rumbold, "St. Louis Pageant and Masque," Survey, July 4, 1914, p. 372.

[10] Rumbold, p. 372.

[11] Percy MacKaye, "A Letter From Percy MacKaye," Theatre Arts, 34, No. 7 (July 1950), p. 51.

[12] MacKaye, "Letter," p. 51.

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